

Water Crisis - 1977

Drought Poses Threat Of Worst Fire Season

By WILLIAM SCHIFFMANN
SAN FRANCISCO (AP) —
The menace of crackling flames sweeping across arid brush and timber acreage threatens much of dust-dry Northern California this year, forestry officials warn.

The danger of one of the worst fire seasons in a half-century is growing as the lack of precipitation and the rapidly-sinking ground water level combine to create thousands of acres of grass and trees just waiting for a spark to set them ablaze.

The first serious fire of the year blackened 560 acres of brushland in the Stanislaus National Forest near Sonora over the Washington's Birthday weekend. A combination of 330

firemen and a well-timed rain-storm extinguished the blaze.

Last year, more than 190,000 acres of state and federal land were blackened by flames, causing losses estimated at almost \$27 million. The worst year on record was 1923 when, in the midst of another brutal drought, 967,000 acres were lost to fire.

"The present fire conditions facing National Forest and state lands in California have the potential for making this one of the most disastrous fire years since 1923," said Bill Powers, information officer for the U.S. Forest Service.

"This year we expect a bad fire season because of the cumulative effects of the drought," warned Mike Schori, chief of fire protection services for the state Division of Forest-

ry. "Brush is going dry. Trees are suffering from drought stress that will further weaken them."

While the fire season is at its peak this summer, the Forest Service will have 5,000 firefighters poised to protect 20 million acres, along with 12 air tankers and 31 helicopters. The state has a slightly larger force to cover 32.1 million acres.

The flames can be triggered by a variety of causes, with man the worst offender. About 65 per cent of all fires are man-caused, with 30 per cent of

those set by arsonists.

One of the most serious recent blazes began last year near Redding, when a single spark from a lawn mower erupted into devastating flames which burned 72,000 acres of brush and timber.

Once the fires start, the lack of water will make it far harder to stop them. Water is so scarce in some areas that there is a problem in mixing the fire retardant used to stifle flames. State officials currently are taking inventory of water sources and equipment.

The threat of flames means that authorities may be forced to close prime recreation land. Federal and state officials feel they may, like last year, have to shut the gates at some Sierra Nevada camping and fishing locations to protect them from the possibility that campfires or cigarettes might start a fire.

Also threatened are jobs in the logging industry. Some lumber firms concede they may have to halt operations in mid-summer.

"We are going to see more

hoot owl shifts (logging at night)," said Bill Snyder, chief forester for Pickering Lumber Co., which owns 70,000 acres of timberland in Tuolumne County.

State officials also anticipate having to seek additional funds to battle fires this year.

"As it stands now, depending on how early the fire season starts, the department probably will be asking for a budget augmentation," said Sisto Garcia at the state's Emergency Command Center in Sacramento.

Garcia said the figure could soar to over \$5 million. Last year state firefighters need an additional \$3.25 million, most of which was spent to hire additional personnel and bring regular crews in earlier in the season.

In addition to the threat of campground closures, authorities already have begun urging brushland residents to clear dry grasses and shrubbery for at least 30 feet from all structures.

People also are being asked

to screen all incinerators, barbecue pits and fireplace chimneys, repair defective mufflers on vehicles and other equipment, and meet with local fire officials to determine a course of action in case of fire.

"At this very moment, the conditions in vegetation make it as dry as it would be in mid-summer," said Arthur Jaseau, head of a special fire alert program for the state forestry department. "We are looking at potentially a worse season than 1923-1924, and that was the worst we've had."

THE BIGGEST EVER IN SANTA CRUZ COUNTY